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ABSTRACT

In the United States, the taboo against recognizing behavioral differences as a normal function of ethnic identity is strongest in the liberal social-science treatment of behavioral comparisons of blacks and whites. Of the many problems which the requirements of the classroom and the office may present for young blacks, conformity to the complex maze of norms defining "correct" English is one of the most imposing. The view of black speech as unstructured and the characterization of lower-class black life as non-verbal seems seriously wrong to linguists and anthropologists. To date, the contribution of linguists to black research has been by far the largest, involving proof of the linguistic integrity of black nonstandard dialect. Of the various pedagogical recommendations made by linguists who studied black dialect, one of the most significant is that black dialect be used side-by-side with standard English in the classroom. (CK)

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FACTS AND ISSUES CONCERNING BLACK DIALECT*

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As the breakdown of racial barriers in American social and economic life is accelerated, greater numbers of young black people are finding it possible to go to schools which were once closed to them, and to seek jobs which until recently were out of their reach. But the swelling stream of black youths into previously all-white schools and vocations has not occurred without creating serious problems. And, although it is possible that some of these problems might (as has frequently been charged) be the result of white bigotry or black ineptitude, most of them seem rather to be a natural consequence of what social scientists have come to call "culture conflict" or, more dramatically, "the clash of cultures." What is meant by these terms is the kinds of misunderstandings and misjudgments which almost inevitably occur whenever the members of two or more cultural groups come together and attempt to interact. Most of the adherents to a particular culture tend to regard their own lifeways and social norms as indicative of the "natural" way for members of their own group (and, by extension, for members of other groups as well) to behave, even though the norms of different cultures are frequently different. Thus it is quite likely that the members of one cultural group will see the behavior of members of other cultural groups as something other than what it really is. The resulting misunderstandings and misjudgments often seriously impair basic communication (and therefore social relations) between the two groups, and thus constitute "culture conflict." Europeans, for example, are fond of saying that Chinese are sly and inscrutable, while the Chinese tend to categorize Europeans as coarse and lacking in self-control. Like the content of most stereotypes, these characterizations represent something more than malicious fantasies; they represent the behaviors of one culture whose functions have been misinterpreted by the members of another culture. (What the European sees as "inscrutability" in the Chinese is merely Chinese politeness, while the behaviors which the European used to

*The present article is the text of an essay which I submitted to Western Electric in New York to accompany a disc recording entitled **The Dialect of the Black American**, produced and recently released by their Community Relations Division. Western Electric has kindly consented to the separate publication of the essay in its original form, which includes a number of paragraphs (the first five) which were eventually omitted from the version accompanying the disc. In order to have the essay conform as closely as possible to the terminology used in the record itself, I had decided to use **black** in many instances where I would otherwise have used **Negro**. Yet, in resubmitting the original manuscript for publication here, I have not felt it worth the effort to go through the text and change every **black** to **Negro**, just to make the article conform in this respect to others I have written. For to do so would be to accord more importance to the matter of terminology than I feel it deserves. After all, the futility of thinking that basic attitudes toward American Negroes could be changed by means of superficial name-substitutions was pointed out almost forty years ago by Carter G. Woodson in an essay "Much Ado About a Name," published as an appendix to his book **The Mis-Education of the Negro** (Washington, D. C., 1933). Today's black militants and white liberals would stand to learn much from a reading of Woodson's critique of their most cherished preoccupation. Suffice it to say, then, that the use of the term **black** in the present article represents no real concession to the game of terminological musical chairs which Negroes and whites are continually playing with each other.

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indicate friendliness and honesty strike the Chinese as vulgar and excessive.) And, since cultural differences can exist between different social groups within a single nation, as well as between different nations, culture conflict can occur at the national as well as international level. In the United States, for example, many whites have traditionally regarded blacks as child-like and boisterous, while blacks have often felt whites to be cold and "hateful." As in the Chinese and European case, there is some behavioral basis for the mutual misunderstanding of white and black in the United States. For, it is an observable fact that blacks tend to use more laughter (as a gesture of friendliness), talk slightly louder, and use more of their bodies in gesturing than do whites. And it is very probably these differences between the two groups, as misinterpreted by the members of each, which are in part responsible for their respective stereotypes.

Apart from their demonstrable falseness, a serious effect of stereotypes derived from culture-conflict (such as that blacks are "childish" or that whites are "cold") is that, explaining observable behavioral differences as they do in terms of innate attributes, they preclude any eventual understanding of the truly social nature of such differences. For, if blacks are truly "child-like," then no amount of social awareness on the part of whites could be expected to alter that fact. And the same would of course be true of white "coldness." Consequently, when persons of good will decide that they simply must come to grips with such stereotypes, they usually adopt the one obvious strategy for countering claims of innate human differences—their total denial. In such a strategy, it is almost routine to appeal to universal human similarity. Thus, in countering beliefs that "Chinese are inscrutable" or "Frenchmen lack self-control," the usual argument is "The Chinese (or Frenchmen) are human beings, just like everyone else. Therefore, it is improbable that they are more inscrutable (or more lacking in self-control) than any other sample of human beings." In this kind of argumentation, the behavioral differences which originally motivated the stereotype are not dealt with. Rather, a denial of the validity of the stereotype has implicit in it a denial of the validity of the behavioral differences themselves. Indeed, so desperately is this strategy of total denial clung to by avowed opponents of racial and ethnic stereotyping that it has now become completely taboo to so much as mention racially or ethnically-correlated behavioral differences—even for the purpose of discrediting the etiology of popular stereotypes.

In the United States, the taboo against recognizing behavioral differences as a normal function of ethnic identity is strongest in the liberal social-science treatment of behavioral comparisons of blacks and whites. Indeed, observations to the effect that "blacks do X while whites do Y" or even "blacks do X more (or less) than whites do" are shunned as potentially racistic. In all fairness, it should be pointed out that there is some historical justification for this attitude. For it is a fact that in the past the main source of contrastive statements about the behavior of blacks and whites was the slaveholding class. Favored with the opportunity of viewing their field hands at close quarters, the early slaveholders were quick to notice a number of differences between the behavior of the imported Africans and that of the colonial whites. (They noticed, for example, that Africans tended to engage in laughter more than whites did.) And succeeding generations of slaveholders were able to observe the continuation of differences in the behavior of American-born blacks and whites. As heirs to a social and economic system which did not appreciate the inherent equality of alternative ways of being human, the slaveholders focused on these differences as evidence of the inherent superiority of whites over blacks. (That blacks were known to laugh more than whites,

for example, was presented as evidence that blacks were more childish and carefree than whites.) In this way the Plantation Negro stereotype was created—a portrait of the American black man in which some very factual (though often exaggerated) data on black behavior was presented in defense of a very questionable theory of black inferiority. Indeed, so entwined did observational fact become with racist fancy through the Negro stereotype that, in the minds of most Americans, the two were almost inseparable. Consequently, when American social science finally took it upon itself to attack the racist view of Negro inferiority, it did so by rejecting the behavioral data of the Negro stereotype along with its genetic implications. And this has been the policy of the social sciences ever since. Hence today, in response to an assertion like "Blacks laugh excessively, therefore they are child-like by nature," one never hears an accurate response like: "Yes, blacks do tend to laugh in more situations than whites do; but this is not a sign of childishness, since laughter is used in black culture to express sociability in situations in which laughter would be inappropriate according to the norms of white culture." Instead, one hears something like: "Blacks are human beings, just like whites, so that it is wrong to claim that one is more child-like than the other. Furthermore, all human beings (white as well as black) laugh—and cry." Implicit in this kind of response is an assertion that, since both blacks and whites are human beings (and fellow Americans), then it is quite improbable that the one would naturally laugh more than the other. Then, when observation shows that blacks do indeed laugh in situations in which whites wouldn't, there is no place for the theorist to go but to psychological explanations which have a pathological bent, such as: "Black people must laugh a lot to cover up their misery," or "A depressing environment has caused them to rely upon immediate gratification, so that they get as much joy as they can out of any trivial event," or "Oppression has made them hysterical." Undoubtedly, explanations of this type will satisfy those who would avoid at any cost the recognition of ethnically-correlated behavioral differences as normal in American society. Moreover, such explanations may have a special appeal for whites whose social conscience is built upon a deep-seated sense of their own psychological superiority, or for blacks in whom self-pity has become a cherished substitute for self respect. No matter how comfortable they may be, however, psycho-pathological explanations of behavioral differences between blacks and whites, like genetic explanations, are largely artificial. And being artificial, they can hardly serve as reliable guides for dealing with such differences directly, or with their many social side effects.

In addition to the presumed egalitarian stance of liberal social scientists, there are other attitudinal barriers to the recognition of distinctively-black behaviors as normal behaviors. Of these, perhaps the most significant is the deep shame which so many upwardly-mobile blacks have felt over the existence of visible differences between the way members of their own ethnic group behave in public (i.e., in the presence of whites) and the way the public (i.e., the white population) behaves. Justified or not, this shame goes back many generations. Long ago, it motivated Negro slaves of the house-servant class to give up many of the distinctively-black (and often African-derived) behaviors of the field hands in favor of the more prestigious (and European-derived) norms of their white masters. But, in the process, they often over-compensated. If the field hands were seen as acting too loud and boisterous in comparison to the "quality" whites, then the house servants would often become overly quiet and reserved. Yet, though the resultant modifications of black fieldhand behavior were seldom brought completely into line with the white models, they nevertheless were

often strikingly different from the more "characteristic" (i.e., more African) black behaviors. Thus the modified behaviors joined with the unmodified ones to create an extremely wide range of variation within the black community, whether slave or free. And, today, image-conscious Negroes are fond of pointing to this range (particularly to the "respectable" end of it) as evidence that "typical" black behaviors do not exist—as if the existence of behavioral variations amongst blacks were enough to preclude the existence of behavioral contrasts between blacks and whites. Logically weak though this image-conscious denial of distinctively-black behavior may be, it unites with the current intellectual aversion to the topic to render exceedingly controversial any serious study of the folk culture of black Americans. And this, in turn, makes it extremely difficult to deal competently with the many cases of innocent yet highly problematic conflict between the black and mainstream cultures in America's changing society. Returning to the problems of black youths entering previously all-white, mainstream institutions for the first time, it is possible to trace out the detrimental effect which such attitudes have had on attempts to deal with learning problems (actually, behavioral conflicts) in one socially-important domain—that of language.

Of the many and varied problems which the requirements of the classroom and the office may present for young black people, conformity to the complex maze of norms defining "correct" English is one of the most imposing. For better or for worse, it is a fact that a variety of English which conforms to such norms (i.e., what is often called *standard* English) is required for many educational purposes and in many vocational situations. Yet, it is also a fact that a significantly high number of black students and employees lack the necessary skills in standard English, not only when they enter school for the first time, but often when they finish school and take up a job as well. The precise extent to which this problem exists, and its actual effect on educational and vocational opportunities, need not be of concern at the moment. Apparently, it exists enough to have motivated a special focus on language arts in educational programs designed for "disadvantaged" students, while its effects on total academic achievement and professional success seem to have been great enough to make this focus a continuing one. But, to whatever extent the problem exists and affects academic and professional performance, something should be done about it. And nothing meaningful can be done about the difficulties which many black students and employees have with standard English unless the nature of that problem is understood, and programs are based upon that knowledge.

Until linguists began to debate with them, educators assumed that the lack of skill which many black people demonstrated with standard English was in fact a lack of skill in handling language per se. Pronunciations like *nuttin'* or *nuffin'* for *nothing*, sentence patterns like *he workin'* for *he's working* or *we ain't go* for *we didn't go*, and word usages like *waste* for *spill* were all regarded as random errors in the stream of speech, the cause of which was laziness, carelessness, or underdeveloped audio-lingual skills. Accordingly, these "mistakes" were labeled "mispronunciations," "bad grammar," and "poor word usage," respectively. So certain were educators of the validity of their diagnosis of language containing such "mistakes," and so forceful and persistent in their condemnation of them, that those who normally spoke this way soon came to believe in the inferiority of their own speech. So today, one hears many blacks refer to even their own nonstandard speech by such terms as "talkin' bad" or "usin' bad grammar" or "talkin' broken English." Now, if these were random mistakes, reasoned the educators, then they ought to be corrected randomly. And

correct them they did. The only trouble was that the corrections didn't always work or weren't easily extendable. One could tell a student that *he workin'* ought to be said as *he is working*, for example, and applaud the results when he promptly repeated the phrase the "correct" way. But then, when that same student took it upon himself to correct his usual *we workin'* to *we is working*, the teacher would have to inform him that it was wrong. In the same way, a student would be rewarded for changing *we ain't go* to *we didn't go*, but faulted if he changed *we ain't gone* to *we didn't gone* instead of *we haven't gone*. And, as if that weren't enough, the keen black student who grasped the fact that his *ain't* became *didn't* in standard English in some cases and *haven't* in others, and who then confidently corrected *he ain't gone* to *he haven't gone* would suddenly find to his dismay that that, too, was wrong. Thus, while the teachers continued to correct their black students' English, the students would continue to make the same old "mistakes"—and sometimes a few new ones to boot. Of course, prolonged educational failure of such magnificent proportions must inevitably become a public issue, and when it does, it requires either a solution or an excuse. And since the educators of black children hadn't been able to solve the language problem, they looked around for an explanation of it which would shift the blame away from the educational process. Some, particularly in the South, were inclined to resurrect the theory of genetic inferiority. But genetic explanations of the low academic achievement of blacks were not popular in the North. Consequently, an explanation had to be found which would not place the blame on the school, but at the same time would not lay it at the door of black genetic structure. Ironically, the possibility of ascribing black language problems to genetic factors itself suggested a ready alternative. For a debate had been going on for some time in the social sciences as to whether certain behavioral characteristics of human groups were predetermined by their genetic endowment or were simply a result of the workings of their environment. Environment, then, became the scapegoat for the low academic achievement of American blacks. The problem was merely to find a way to blame language problems on the environment. This was eventually done by claiming that there were psychologically "unstimulating" environments which, because of a dearth of intellectual stimuli, failed to motivate language development in children raised in their confines. There was a tacit assumption, of course, that the environment of most lower-class blacks was of this type. But, since language is very much a social phenomenon, it must have seemed a bit far-fetched, even to educators, to attribute a purported language deficit entirely to a poor physical environment. Something social was needed; and it was supplied by the widely-held belief that children learned language entirely from adults. Since many lower-class black families were known to be one-parent families, and since many lower-class black mothers were thought to communicate less with their children than white and middle-class mothers did, it seemed reasonable to conclude that there was a breakdown among lower-class blacks of the normal patterns of transmission of language from parent to child. Consequently, to the educator's random correction of black students' English, social psychologists were able to furnish a pseudo-scientific justification that these students were "non-verbal," or "verbally destitute," or "poorly languaged," or "linguistically deprived." It should be noted that the traditional view of black nonstandard speech as made up of articulatory blunders, incomplete sentences, and a lack of vocabulary furnished a fertile ground for the sophistic theory that lower-class blacks failed to learn language at home.

If the view of black nonstandard speech as unstructured and the characterization of lower-class black social life as non-verbal seemed reasonable

to educators and psychologists, they seemed seriously wrong to linguists and anthropologists. At best, they did not accord with otherwise universal truisms about human language and social behavior. For linguists had never found a language (or a variety of a language) without its own structure, while anthropologists had never encountered a social group in which language did not play a central role, and was not transmitted from generation to generation. At worst, these assessments of black language and life stood as evidence of a lack of common sense as well as a lack of contact with black reality on the part of those who made them. For the fact that lower-class blacks would make some "mistakes" in their English (e.g., they might say *bofe* for *both* or *we tired* for *we are tired*) but not others (e.g., they would never say *boke* for *both* or *tired we* for *we are tired*) should itself be clear evidence of structure in their language. And anyone walking down the street in a black ghetto, or passing by the playground of a black school, could hardly avoid having his ears bombarded by the incessant chatter of supposedly "non-verbal" children. But if linguists and anthropologists were somewhat amused by the absurdity of the educationalist and social-psychologist views of why blacks were having language problems in the schools, they were very much alarmed by the widespread popularity of these views, and by their devastating effects on the self-respect and academic achievement of black students. Consequently, a few linguists and anthropologists began to intervene by presenting a culture-conflict model of black educational failure and derivative suggestions for curriculum reform.

To date, the linguistic contribution has been by far the largest, involving proof of the linguistic integrity of black nonstandard dialect (through the description of many of its structural characteristics), suggestions for teaching standard English to speakers of black dialect (through the comparison of structural characteristics of the two forms of English), and an assertion of black linguistic identity (through the finding of evidence that black dialect evolved independently from white dialects of English). The one thing linguists have not yet done has been to bring about uniformity in the use of a term for the nonstandard speech of black people. *Negro dialect* is the term most well established by past usage, while *Black English* now seems to be gaining currency. But other terms have also been used, such as *Negro English*, *N.N.E.* or *NNE* (standing either for *nonstandard Negro English* or for *Negro nonstandard English*), *Black folk speech*, and *Black dialect*. (In the written use of these terms, words like *dialect* and *speech* are sometimes capitalized and sometimes not.) All of these terms have been used at one time or another by serious scholars, and each has its advantages and its drawbacks. Linguists have leaned toward *Negro dialect* because it parallels terms like *Scottish dialect*, and because *dialect* is the linguist's technical word for a language variety. But non-linguists have been less receptive of terms containing this word, because of the somewhat derrogatory connotation of *dialect* in popular usage. But then the terms *Black English* and *Negro English*, which avoid this problem, share the common weakness that they can too easily be taken as applying to standard as well as nonstandard speech, just as long as it is used by black people. This allows those who happen to be ashamed of the nonstandard speech of lower-class blacks to dismiss it as a broken and degenerate jargon, and to designate the standard English often spoken by educated black people as the "real" Black English. The one term which seems to avoid all of these difficulties is *Black folk speech*. It has its own drawback, however, which is that the word *folk* has enough of a rural suggestion about it to make the term awkward when applied (as it now frequently must be) to urban situations.

But in spite of the terminological flux, and in spite of occasional differences of opinion among linguists as to the best analytical procedures to use or the right interpretation of the data gathered, the evidence in support of the structural integrity of black nonstandard dialect was overwhelming. Not only was it established that the dialect had a sound system and a grammatical structure of its own, but it was also discovered that in certain ways its structure was even more communicatively efficient than that of standard English. For example, black dialect turned out to have a special use of *be* which indicates extended or repeated action, and a special use of *been* (usually stressed) to indicate the completion of an action in the remote past. Thus a speaker of black dialect would consistently distinguish between *Dey be singin' in church* (meaning that they are in the habit of doing it) and *Dey singin' in church* (meaning that they are doing it at the moment), or between *I bought it* (meaning that it was bought at some unspecified time) and *I been bought it* (meaning that it was bought long ago). In standard English, there is no grammatical way to make such distinctions; one can only say *They are singing in church* and *I bought it*, no matter which of the precise meanings expressed in black dialect are intended. Yet, even where black dialect and standard English might agree in the meaning expressed by a set of parallel grammatical constructions, there could be differences in the form of these constructions. For example, both black dialect and standard English have possessive constructions of the type noun-plus-noun, where the first noun refers to the possessor and the second noun to the thing possessed. But while standard English requires the use of a special possessive marker (written *-'s*) at the end of the possessor noun in such constructions, black dialect does not. Accordingly, one must say *my uncle's car* in standard English, but may say *my uncle car* in black dialect, although the meaning of the two utterances is identical. Of course, there were also numerous grammatical constructions which were identical in both meaning and form in black dialect and standard English, such as the modification of nouns by adjectives placed before the noun. That is, one would normally say *I live in a big house* in both black dialect and standard English, but one would not say *I live in a house big* in either. (Black dialect does indeed have a construction of the type *my house big*, but this is equivalent to standard English *my house is big*, rather than to *my big house*.) Of course, it goes without saying that linguists found both similarities and differences between black dialect and standard English in the matter of pronunciation, although such differences between the two kinds of English seemed to be greater than in the case of word-equivalents. In other words, it appeared to be more likely that black dialect and standard English would use the same word for a particular object, than that they would have the same pronunciations for that word. And although an obvious exception to this observation is provided by the frequent use of slang or "jive talk" by many speakers of black dialect, particularly in the larger cities, the vast majority of slang expressions are by their very nature unstable and do not remain in use for long. At any rate, there is some doubt as to whether even those slang expressions which are used exclusively by blacks ought to be considered a characteristic of black dialect as such, since they are generally absent from rural varieties of black dialect, while in urban ghettoes they may occur together with the pronunciation and grammar of either black dialect or standard English. It is probably best to consider black slang a separate entity from black dialect, with the understanding that the two are often used together.

To the linguists who studied black language usage, the pedagogical implications of many of their findings seemed obvious and incontrovertible

—even when these went against established educational views, which indeed they often did. For example, before the linguistic intervention, and in response to their own appraisal of the special language problems of black lower-class school children, a number of prominent educational psychologists had urged the creation of language-enrichment programs for lower-class black children of pre-school age. In the view of these psychologists, such programs were needed to offset the failure of many black children to acquire in their home environment what were felt to be basic language skills. Yet linguists found that virtually all of the lower-class black children whom they interviewed were fluent speakers of a structurally normal (though often nonstandard) variety of English. This meant that, no matter how emotionally appealing they might be, programs of the language-enrichment type were founded on a false premise. And, since many language-enrichment programs were already beginning to fail, their proven linguistic inaccuracy could easily be a contributory factor to that failure. But the pedagogical implications of linguistic findings on black language usage were by no means all so negative. For, in detailing many of the structural differences between black dialect and standard English, linguists were actually providing a blueprint for the development of special procedures for the teaching of standard English to speakers of black dialect.

In their pedagogical philosophy as well as in their content, these procedures were a far cry from the random correction of "mistakes" which had previously characterized the so-called "language arts" for black students. In recognizing that most of these "mistakes" were the result of confusion on the part of the learner between the structural patterns of his own dialect and those of standard English, the linguistic model of structural interference (i.e., the structural influence of one language or dialect on the comprehension or production of another) opened the way for the use in inner-city classrooms of modified foreign-language teaching techniques. Incorporating structural comparisons between the language of the learner and the language being taught, these techniques had originally been developed for the teaching of such clearly "foreign" languages as Arabic, Chinese, and Spanish to speakers of English and, later, for the teaching of English to speakers of foreign languages. (This last application came to be known professionally as TEFL—teaching English as a foreign language, TESL—teaching English as a second language, or TESOL—teaching English to speakers of other languages.) Although it was true that black dialect shared an infinitely larger number of structural features with standard English than did languages like Arabic, Chinese, or Spanish, the linguists pointed out that this merely made the areas of structural conflict that much more difficult for black students to overcome without pedagogical assistance. In learning standard English, the speaker of Arabic or Chinese would know from the start that he was faced with a language-learning problem, since it would be obvious that the language being learned was not the same language as his own. For the black learner of standard English, however, the fact that what was being presented in school seemed very similar to his own speech would be likely to convince him that he already knew the intricacies of the school language. For the English-speaking learner of Spanish, it soon becomes obvious that Spanish has two different equivalents of the verb *to be: ser* and *estar*. It is obvious, not so much because these verbs have somewhat different meanings, but rather because they sound and look different—both from each other and from English *to be*—and because they inflect differently. For the speaker of black dialect, however, it is by no means obvious that, while his own *is* and *be* are different verbs with different functions, *is* is merely an inflected variant of *be*

in standard English. Nor, in fact, is this likely to be any more obvious to the teacher. For, if standard English has the verb forms *be* and *is*, and the black student is observed to have them in his own speech as well, then one might easily assume that he uses them just as in standard English. And other differences, even when involving nothing more than simple inflectional variations, can be just as confusing. The black student's *here it is* matches standard English, but his *here dey is* does not; his *he don't want it* is at variance with standard English, while his *we don't want it* is not. Because of the subtlety of the structural relationships between black dialect and standard English, the average black student simply cannot be expected to perceive with complete accuracy exactly where his dialect leaves off and the standard language begins. Indeed, this may be one reason why waves of foreign immigrants, speaking languages like Italian, Yiddish, and Ukranian, have been able to acquire standard English within one or two generations in the United States, while American blacks have not been able to do so as completely over a much longer span of time.

Another pedagogically important fact which emerged from the linguistic research on black dialect was its relative uniformity throughout the United States. Sometimes obscured by age, sex, and socio-economic differences within a single black community, the underlying uniformity of black dialect from region to region became apparent as soon as these social variables were controlled for. Thus, nonstandard dialect with essentially the same structural characteristics was reported in use by young, lower-class black males in such far-flung urban centers as Washington, Harlem, Chicago, San Antonio, and Oakland. And, not surprisingly, these characteristics were also found to be prevalent in the nonstandard speech of blacks in the rural South. Minor variations in pronunciation, grammar, and idiom did indeed occur, but the variations within black dialect seemed to be of less pedagogical importance than those differences from standard English (and even from white nonstandard speech) which proved so characteristic of black dialect. For example, in the so-called Geechee variety of black dialect spoken in Charleston, South Carolina, one might say *we house* where speakers of other varieties of black dialect would, like speakers of standard English and white nonstandard dialect, say *our house*. Yet Geechee shares with other varieties of black dialect virtually all of the structural features mentioned earlier, plus many more. And it is such features which distinguish black dialect from both standard English and white nonstandard dialect of whatever type. Obviously, the pedagogical significance of this state of affairs lies in the possibility it provides for developing language-arts material with an extremely wide applicability. It also means, of course, that separate research programs will not be needed in each and every black community in the United States; the scientific findings for one community will be likely to have a high degree of validity—and therefore of pedagogical applicability—in other communities throughout the nation.

Finally, of the various pedagogical recommendations which were made by linguists who studied black dialect, there was one which stemmed less from their immediate research than from their professional view of the basic equality of all varieties of human speech, and their knowledge that it was commonplace for people to learn and use two or more varieties of a language. This was the recommendation that black dialect be used side-by-side with standard English in the classroom. Some linguists felt that this should be done only in the early grades, and only as a way of relating standard English to the pre-school language of black children. Others, however, envisioned the eventual retention of black dialect as a pedagogical companion of standard English through the secondary level, and perhaps beyond. At first, this recommendation was limited to oral usage. But more

recently, a few linguists have begun to consider the use of a written form of black dialect as a device in beginning reading instruction for those black children whose knowledge of standard English proves inadequate for decoding traditional reading texts.

If the pedagogical implications of the linguistic research on black dialect seemed obvious and incontrovertible to most linguists and anthropologists, they nevertheless appeared decidedly radical and controversial to many educators and educational psychologists. The reason was that the linguistic view of nonstandard speech in general, and the linguistic findings on black dialect in particular, clearly argued against certain social beliefs, theoretical assumptions, and methodogical traditions which were a part of the educational heritage.

Perhaps the most controversial finding to emerge from this linguistic research was that black nonstandard dialect was different from white nonstandard dialect—even in the Deep South. Moreover, research on the history of black and white dialect in North America revealed that they had always been different. This obviously meant that a white-black dichotomy in American language usage was as old as the earliest settlement of the colonies by European and African stock. And if this was true for language, it was very probably true for other kinds of cultural behavior as well. But in the view of many socially liberal educators, this was an uncomfortable conclusion to come to. For it attacked the cherished "melting pot" image of American society, in which foreign immigrants were supposed to be culturally transformed into Anglo-Saxon-like Americans within one or two generations. What is more, American blacks were often pointed to as exemplifying the most complete transformation ever effected by the American melting pot. Because, for reasons mentioned earlier, it had become scientifically taboo to admit to racially or ethnically-correlated behavioral differences, the entire educationalist rhetoric on the achievement problems of black school children had been adjusted to the strictly monocultural perspective implicit in the melting-pot image. And since it was an unwritten rule of this perspective that behavioral differences between black and white children had to be denied, ignored, or attributed to some sort of abnormal (i.e., neither natural nor permanent) cause, it was most convenient for educators, to accept the environmental-pathology model furnished by the psychologists as an explanation for the endemically low school-language performance of black children. It was on this model, then, that the educators had based virtually all of their remedial methods for dealing with black children who had language problems in school. Yet, here were the linguists saying that black nonstandard speech was fully developed and well-organized language, and thereby refuting the entrenched language-pathology model. And, what was still worse, these linguists were saying that black nonstandard dialect was not the same as white nonstandard dialect, asserting thereby that the American melting pot had lumps in it, and that one of these lumps was black! It soon became apparent to many educators that if they accepted the linguistic view of black dialect, with its obvious pedagogical implications, they would not merely be accepting new information of an innocuous kind; they would be acknowledging the refutation of their entire approach to the education of black children. Some educators were able to do this without misgivings, but others were not.

For those who were unwilling to accept the linguists' conclusions with respect to the nature of black dialect, and who wanted their opposition to appear reasonable to impartial observers, it was necessary to find a way to dismiss the linguistic findings on the dialect as something other than empirical data. A possible way of doing this was suggested by the striking

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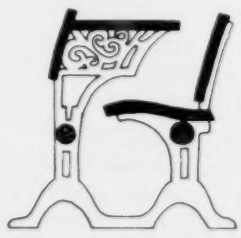

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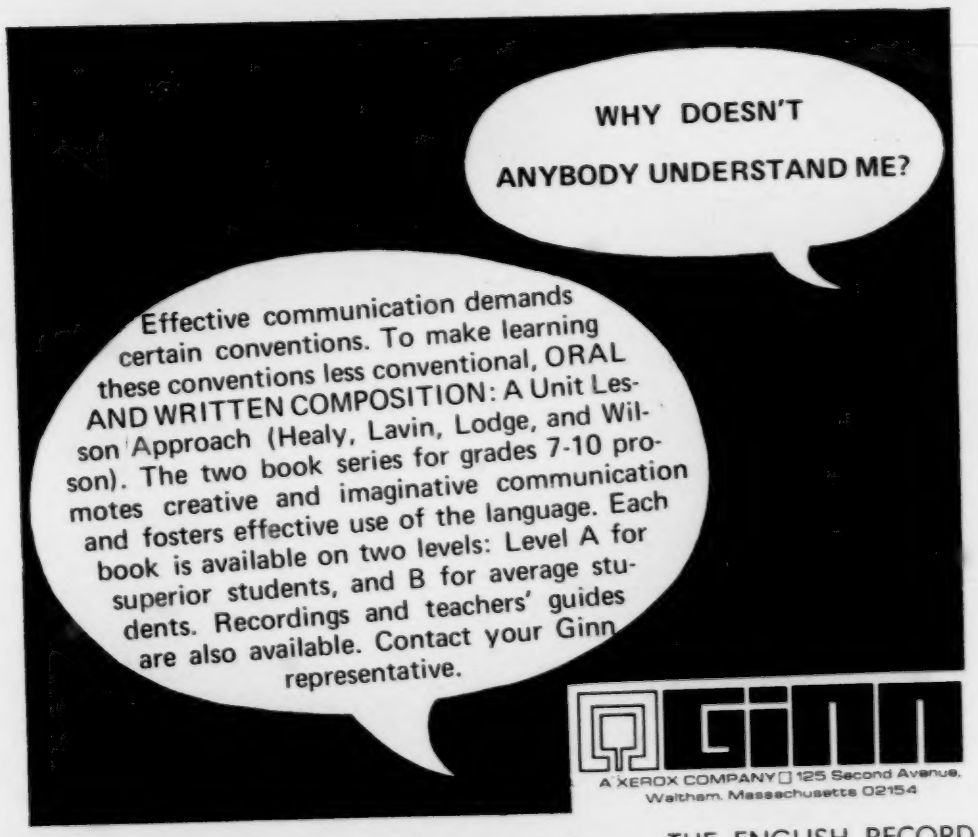
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similarity between the transcriptions of black dialect published by the linguists and the kind of black dialect one could find in the older plantation literature. Given this resemblance, it was easy for opponents of the linguistic viewpoint to make the charge that the linguists (who were mostly white) had drawn their material, not from the real speech of black people, but from the traditional stereotype of black speech. Although those who made this charge were correct in discerning a similarity between the linguistic transcriptions of black speech and traditional literary black dialect, they were quite wrong in assuming that the former was a copy of the latter, or that the latter was entirely artificial. In general, the older plantation literature was written by whites who had been born and raised on plantations, and who had learned the dialect in childhood from black playmates (who often were their only playmates) on the plantation. Thus, even if slightly concentrated at times, the black dialect to be found in the plantation literature was a fairly accurate rendition of the actual speech of plantation fieldhands. And the reason why the up-to-date linguistic transcriptions of the speech of lower-class urban blacks turned out to look so much like the plantation dialect was simply that modern urban black dialect was a direct descendent of plantation black dialect. This fact might be an uncomfortable one for those who can see nothing but degradation and pathology in the black plantation experience; but the problem lies there, and not in the reliance by linguists on the literary representation of an older form of black dialect.

While such objections as there were to the linguistic description of black dialect focused initially on the question of black-white differences, this did not remain the central issue for long. After all, differences between black and white children in school-language performance were a matter of record, and therefore required some sort of explanation. The language-pathology model advanced by the psychologists had of course been an attempt to furnish one, but its validity had been seriously challenged by the linguistic evidence. And while, to most educators, the language-difference model might be less compatible with their assimilationist values than its psychological predecessor had been, it was still infinitely more comfortable than the other available model for explaining black-white differences in academic achievement: the genetic-inferiority model. Furthermore, the linguists' claims for the historical and structural integrity of black dialect (as a distinct entity from standard English and white nonstandard dialect) came at a time of growing self-awareness on the part of American blacks. Soon, educators found that they could openly entertain a linguistic model of black-white dialect differences without as great a danger of being interpreted as inferring thereby that black people were inferior. In fact, the wheel turned so far that one was now more likely to be considered a racist for advocating the language-pathology model than for accepting the language-difference model.

It is somewhat ironic that, while educational resistance to the linguistic view of black dialect died down rather quickly on the issue of its social and structural uniqueness, it continued on in terms of another issue which actually had nothing to do with such potentially controversial matters as racial or ethnic differences in language usage, or the structural details of black dialect itself. Rather, the issue which turned out to be much more deep-seated and enduring had to do with the traditional linguistic view of the nature of nonstandard dialects in general and their relationship to standardized dialects. As part of their professional training, linguists learned that virtually all of the world's languages were made up of a number of different varieties, or *dialects*, and that each of these had its own history of development into what it was, its own linguistic structure

including a set of sounds, a grammar, and a vocabulary), and its own particular function in the society which used it. Of course, linguists also knew that the developmental history and grammatical structure of only one or two of a particular language's dialects would be likely to have been noted down in books, and that this fact was often erroneously taken as evidence that only such dialects of a particular language had a history and a grammar. At the same time, linguists realized that these social facts concerning the different dialects of a language had nothing to do with the historical validity and structural integrity of any dialect, be it standard or nonstandard, be it of high prestige or low. In other words, insofar as the comparative structural and historical evaluation of different dialects were concerned. linguists were relativistic and egalitarian. In a sense which went to the very core of their professional outlook, linguists regarded any dialect as every bit as "good" as any other dialect.

Perhaps inevitably, the professional relativism with which the linguists treated black dialect and standard English clashed with the normativistic comparisons which educators had traditionally relied on in their attempts to replace the one with the other. Though it appeared in the context of black dialect, this basic conflict between linguistic relativism and educational normativism was not motivated by the unique social or structural characteristics of black dialect; it would have occurred over any other kind of nonstandard dialect which linguists might have chosen to study and describe. It just happened that, because of a national focus on racial inequities in American public education, the special school-language problems of black children had caught the attention of a number of linguists.

To start with, many educators were disturbed by the linguists' assertion that black dialect served as useful a purpose in the black community as standard English did in mainstream life, and therefore that the two forms of English could, and should, coexist in the language repertoire of those who found it necessary to function in both societies. The reason why this assertion upset even many of those educators who recognized nonstandard dialect as "real" language was that it seemed unrealistic in terms of a tacit assumption which American education had made concerning the use of different varieties of English. If a name were needed for this assumption, a fairly descriptive one might be the "single space" theory of dialect usage; for the assumption was that an individual had room in the language "compartment" of his brain for only one variety of a language. Accordingly, a person could be expected to know and use a nonstandard dialect, or to know and use standard English, but that it would overtax his language-production capacity to expect him to know and use both. Indeed, it followed quite reasonably from the "single space" theory that the continued use of nonstandard dialect by a school child was a sure sign that the child would not learn standard English well. Perhaps one reason why educators clung so tenaciously to the "single space" theory of dialect usage was that, if true, it automatically gave rise to a pedagogical corollary which indicated that standard English could be taught quite easily. For, if it was true that the knowledge and use of nonstandard dialect blocked the learning and use of standard English, then prohibiting the use of nonstandard dialect should eventually cause the student to forget it; and forgetting it would create a language vacuum into which standard English would flow almost by itself. It was a belief in this "vacuum" theory which led many English teachers to spend more time discouraging the use of nonstandard dialect by their pupils than in actually teaching them how to use standard English.

One way in which linguists were able to counteract the resistance to black dialect stemming from a commitment to the "single space" theory was

by pointing out that in Europe, for example, it was normal for educated persons to know and use more than one dialect of their national language. Another way was to suggest the analogy of, say, a Japanese merchant who found it necessary to do business in France. Obviously, the fact that he already spoke Japanese would not mean that he could never learn to speak French, nor would the learning of French force him to give up his knowledge of Japanese. If taught French well, he would then be able to use both languages—each on its appropriate occasion. And, if a demonstration of the falsity of the "vacuum" theory were needed, it would be pointed out that forcing the Japanese merchant to stop using his native language would hardly result by itself in any ability on his part to speak French.

While even the resistance based on pedagogical normativism has been disappearing from the educational perspective on black dialect, it must be admitted that educators are still left with a rather formidable amount of technical information on the dialect to be digested. Ideally, educators at all levels should learn about the historical background of black dialect, and its overall structural relationship to standard English. English teachers, in particular, should familiarize themselves with some of the more important points of structural conflict between standard English and black dialect, in order to understand the difficulties which a black student may have with classroom language requirements. Employers, too, should come to understand that the use of black dialect by an employee or applicant is in no way an indication of low mental ability.

The once-frequent charges of racism and stupidity which black students and employees and white educators and employers have leveled at each other are now giving way to a realization that much-needed knowledge and understanding, not name-calling, offers the most hope for overcoming the problems associated with the entry of black youths into mainstream schools and jobs. This essay is offered as an initial step toward the knowledge and understanding necessary to deal with language-conflict and, by implication, with other areas of innocent yet destructive culture-conflict between black and white.

APPENDIX: FURTHER READINGS ON BLACK LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

After decades of scientific and pedagogical neglect, the language and culture of black Americans has finally begun to receive the attention they merit from scholars and educators. In fact, the literature on these subjects is currently in a state of rapid expansion, as a glance at the "Black Studies" section of any good bookstore will confirm. Yet this literature is of very mixed quality, and the beginner will do well to seek guidance on the initial selection.

The following is a list of primary reading on black language and culture which are of uniformly high quality, having been written for the most part by professional linguists and anthropologists. They have all been written with the intelligent layman in mind, but they are by no means "popular" treatments. At times, the layman may find them too comprehensive, or the treatment too technical, because the authors have also written these works as contributions to their particular disciplines, and therefore have been addressing their colleagues as well. But this has an advantage; it gives these works more than passing value. As the reader becomes more informed in the area, he can return to these works again and again, and discover new information and insights which were previously obscure. The vast majority of these works deserve to be in the private collection of anyone seriously interested in Afro-American language and culture. (Indeed, one item—that of Herskovits—has already become a classic in this field.) Consequently, only items which are still in print have been listed,

and procurement information (such as the publisher and price) has been included in every case. The addresses of most of the publishers will be known to any bookseller, except perhaps the two non-commercial ones which, for the record, are:

The Center for Applied Linguistics
1717 Massachusetts Avenue, N. W.
Washington, D. C. 20036

and

The Florida FL Reporter
801 N.E. 177th Street
North Miami Beach, Florida 33162

The list is divided into two parts: those collections, anthologies, or books which supply background information on black culture, and those which deal directly with black dialect and associated pedagogical issues. Although by no means the only reliable or informative works of their kind on black language or culture, these will give the ambitious reader a good start, and the bibliographic references which they include can serve as a guide to more extensive reading.

SECTION I: CULTURAL BACKGROUND

1. Roger D. Abrahams, *Positively Black.* Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970. Pp. xii, 177. Price, $5.95 hardcover, $2.95 paperback.

A study of black identity through black performance patterns. The book contains an insightful discussion of what could be called "black talk" (meaning the *use* of language among black people, rather than its *form* as is emphasized by the term "black dialect"), in which the author shows the interrelationship of discourse styles, speaker roles, and certain folklore motifs.

2. Ulf Hannerz, *Soulside; Inquiries into Ghetto Culture and Community.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1969. Pp. 236. Price, $5.95 hardcover, $2.95 paperback.

An ethnographic study of a modern black inner-city neighborhood. The book is rich in its analysis of life styles and sex roles, and contains informative discussions of the function of rumor and gossip in the ghetto.

3. Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past.* Boston: Beacon Hill Press, 1958. [A slightly updated re-issue of the 1941 text.] Pp. xxxii, 368. Price, $2.45 per copy, paperback only.

Originally published in 1941, this was the first serious attempt to trace Afro-American social and behavioral patterns back to African sources. Chapter VIII, on language and the arts, contains a number of provocative observations on possible African influences in the speech of New World Negroes. Has insightful comparative observations.

4. Charles Keil, *Urban Blues.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966. Pp. xii, 231. Price. $2.45 per copy, paperback only.

Although primarily a study of the urban style of blues singing, this book argues for, and illustrates, the existence of a black urban culture distinct from white or mainstream urban culture. Much of the perspective developed in the book on black music is directly transferable to other aspects of black culture.

5. John Szwed (editor), *Black America.* New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1970. Pp. xvi, 303. Price, $7.95 per copy.

A collection of 23 essays on various aspects of Afro-American language and culture; some with a historical, some a descriptive, and some a political orientation.

SECTION II: BLACK DIALECT

1. [Alfred C. Aarons, editor] "Dialects" by Jean Malmstrom; "Negro Children's Dialect in the Inner-City" and "Non-Standard Negro Dialects—Convergence or Divergence?" by J. L. Dillard; "Sociolinguistic Factors in the History of American Negro Dialects" and "Continuity and Change in American Negro Dialects" by William A. Stewart. [From *The Florida FL Reporter*, 1966-1968.] Price, $1.25 for the five articles.

A packet of reprintings of articles on black dialect from past issues of The Florida FL Reporter, this collection is particularly useful in providing an understanding of the history and development of black dialect, and its position within the American dialect complex.

2. Alfred C. Aarons, Barbara Y. Gordon, and William A. Stewart (editors), *Linguistic-Cultural Differences and American Education* [=Vol. 7, No. 1 of *The Florida FL Reporter*, Spring/Summer 1969]. Pp. x, 176. Price, $6.50 per copy.

A special anthology issue of *The Florida FL Reporter* devoted entirely to the implications for education of linguistic and cultural diversity in American society. Of the 43 articles included, almost half deal wholely or in part with black dialect.

3. Joan C. Baratz and Roger W. Shuy (editors), *Teaching Black Children to Read*. Washington, D. C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1969. Pp. xiv, 219. Price, $5.00 per copy.

Contains eight articles (five of them appearing for the first time in this book) on the implications of black dialect for beginning reading instruction. Some of the contributors suggest the use of elementary readers in the vernacular language of black children, and furnish sample texts in black dialect.

4. Ralph W. Fasold and Roger W. Shuy (editors), *Teaching Standard English in the Inner City*. Washington, D. C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1970. Pp. xx, 141. Price, $5.00 per copy.

Contains six articles on the techniques of teaching standard English to speakers of black dialect. These readings will serve as an orientation for teachers of black students of all ages. The articles are uniformly rich in examples, both of the structural features of black dialect and the application of modified foreign language teaching techniques in the English classroom.

5. Irwin Feigenbaum, *English Now*. [Developmental Edition.] New York: New Century, Educational Division, Meredith Corporation, 1970. Teacher's Manual. Pp. viii, 158. Price, $2.64 per copy. Student's Workbook. Pp. iv, 158. Price $13.20 per package of 5. Reel-to-reel tapes are also available at $156.00 per set of 14.

This is probably the first course in standard English designed specifically for speakers of black dialect, and based on a comparison of the two varieties of English. The pedagogical techniques utilized in the course are aimed at high school students and below, but the linguistic problems dealt with are shared by many adults as well.

6. Walter A. Wolfram, *A Sociolinguistic Description of Detroit Negro Speech*. Washington, D. C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1969. Pp. xviii, 237. Price, $5.00 per copy.

A detailed study of certain structural characteristics of the speech of Detroit Negroes, and their correlations with such social factors as age, sex, and economic status. Comparison with white usage in Detroit, and Negro usage in other cities, are made.